

## WOMEN'S ATHLETICS: BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND CONFISCATION?

by Nicolas Chamerois and Pascal Gillon\*

Although the Olympic Movement first opened its doors to women in 1900, women's athletics was not included in the Games until 1928. Most men's athletics events had been introduced in 1912. For a short time now, women have been allowed to enter the same events as men (the women's pole vault was included for the first time at the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney). Thus they are about to be on an equal footing with men, at least in terms of the events they can enter. However, does this 'victory' of Olympic recognition reflect a desire to promote athletics among women or is it the result of women's actual participation in these events?

It is difficult to measure the effect of the publicity generated by the inclusion of a new event in the Olympic Games. However, it is easier to gauge levels of participation in an event, particularly by studying athletes' performances, where national records provide information suitable for statistical analysis.

By examining participation and performance in athletics, it should be possible to determine more precisely how universal women's sport actually is. They may well appear at high-profile events, but is there any way of showing that the marathon or pole vault is developing throughout the world? And if an event is genuinely global in terms of participation, do athletes from every country have a real chance of producing an international performance?

In order to try to answer these ques-

tions, we thought it appropriate to analyze national athletics records. Athletics comprises a range of natural movements common to all human beings, which makes it all the more global. It is also a highly popular sport, attracting a great deal of interest from spectators and television viewers alike, which in turn encourages people to participate and compete.

Finally, we will attempt to define briefly some of the factors restricting the spread of women's athletics, looking at national differences and varying levels of performance.

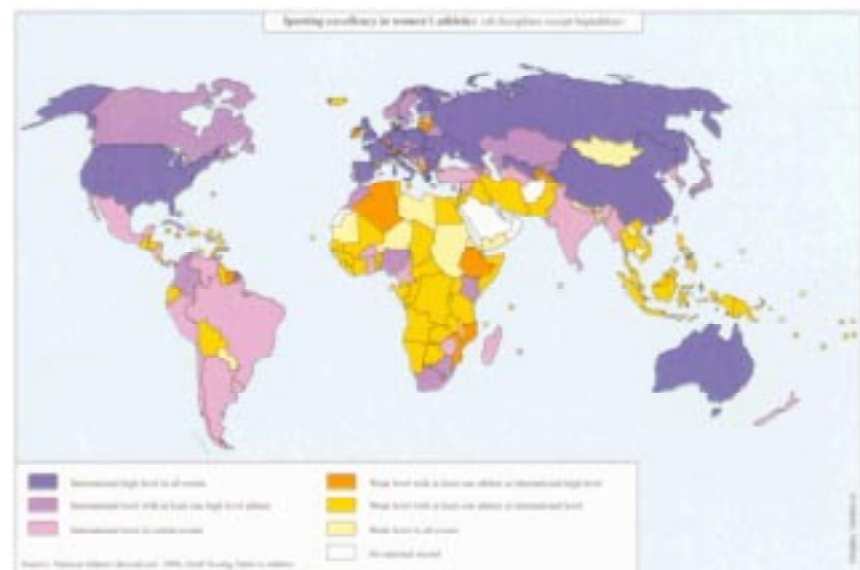
### Athletics: a global sport?

In order to measure how global athletics is, we decided to consider national records. Although these are

not always indicative of how many people practise a sport, they do testify to a level of performance and the existence of some form of organization (linked to the federations). We could have analyzed world records, but this would have eliminated a number of countries altogether, particularly the less competitive. Another possibility would have been to study the results of a particular competition, such as the Olympic Games or World Championships. However, based on a one-off event with minimum qualifying standards, such data would not have been truly representative.

### Unevenly distributed universalism

Athletics is considered the most universal of all sports because, as we have already mentioned, it consists of what appear to be natural movements: everyone can run, jump and throw.





Of 199 National Olympic Committees (NOCs), 194 keep women's records, the only exceptions being those in the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain). The combination of religious and political power in these countries does not promote the development of women through sport. The Islamic Republic of Iran, meanwhile, is something of a half-way house: since the fall of the Shah, the only women's record to have been broken is that of the marathon.

Apart from these rare exceptions, athletics is extremely widespread, from the small Oceanian NOCs to the poorest countries in Africa. However, while the records suggest it is more or less universal, a study of individual events shows large disparities in terms of geographical spread:

- one-third of NOCs keep records in all women's events. These are mainly in Europe, America and a few Oceanian and African countries. Some are either rich, with a strong sporting tradition (western Europe, the United States of America, Canada, Australia), or have a strong sports development policy (eastern Europe, People's Republic of China, etc), while almost all South American and South-East Asian countries also participate in every event.

- NOCs in Africa, Asia and the



American Marion Jones (foreground), triple Olympic champion in Sydney.

Caribbean have great difficulty in practising every athletics event, probably for financial reasons. Countries with medium-sized income (Brazil, Mexico, Morocco, etc) keep records in all events, whereas many less developed nations (particularly in Africa) are unable to do so. The national economy is a key factor behind a lack of investment in sport. Clearly, many sub-Saharan Africans, for example, have other things than sport to worry about, the most important being the need to find enough to eat.

Not all women's athletics events are practised globally, therefore. Far from it, in fact.

### Distribution of events image more important than technique

By comparing the geographical spread of the 100m and the 10km walk, it is easy to see the difference between a global event and one with limited participation. Clear patterns emerge in the distribution of records.

### Running: participation levels inversely proportional to distance

Running is the discipline in which most countries keep women's records. It requires minimal facilities (a track is all that is necessary to train athletes) and is an easy way of enabling athletes to express their natural abilities. In distances

between 100m and 1,500m, more than 90% of NOCs keep women's records, which is an impressive figure. However, the same cannot be said where longer distances are concerned. Only 75% of NOCs have records for the marathon, for example. Similarly, maybe due to a higher level of technical difficulty, only 166 NOCs keep records for the 100m hurdles and 151 for the 400m hurdles.

Certain races carry a certain amount of prestige for NOCs and athletes because they tend to attract widespread press coverage.

## **Throwing: “a stone’s throw” from universality**

Almost all NOCs keep records in the women’s javelin, shot put and discus events. The hammer is lagging behind somewhat, due to the fact that it has only recently been introduced into athletics competitions.

## **Jumping: new events less widespread**

The long jump and high jump are practised all over the world. However, the women’s triple jump, which made its first appearance in the 1995 World Championships in Gothenburg, and to an even greater extent, the pole vault, introduced at the 1999 World Championships in Seville, are still far from being global events.

The main reason for the differences that exist between the NOCs is the introduction of new women’s events. The hammer, triple jump and pole vault have yet to break through in all the world’s stadia. Many countries are finding it difficult to introduce these

events, since they require expensive equipment and a high level of technical expertise.

## **North-South divide in levels of excellence**

The notion of records also implies a notion of standards. For example, by analyzing performances, we should be able to evaluate how competitive NOCs and athletes actually are. Using the table of valuations (known as the “Hungarian table”), we have given each performance a certain number of points.

We added up the total number of points represented by each country’s records in order to compare the overall performance of each NOC (see box below).

## **General level of performance: North better than South**

There is a clear distinction between North and South in terms of the standard of women’s athletics. Most of the top NOCs are found in the

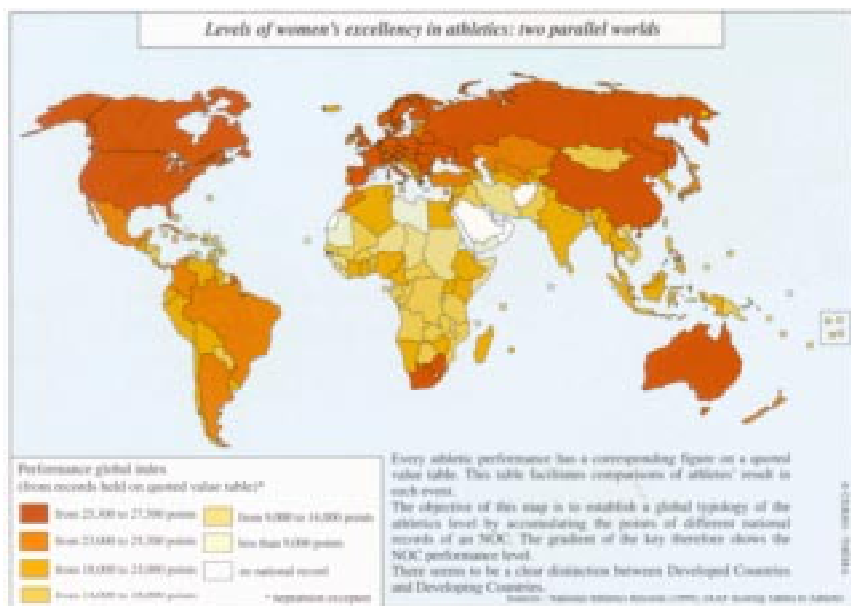
Northern Hemisphere, except for Australia and South Africa. The American NOCs (Mexico, Chile, Brazil, etc) and those with medium-sized economies practise all the disciplines of athletics, but fail to attain the highest international standards. African and Asian countries, along with the Oceanian islands, have a low level of overall performance.

For a country to be successful in all athletics events, it needs a certain level of wealth. Athletes seem to have a greater chance of success if they come from a “rich” nation. Other factors are involved, however.

## **Size and political will as factors of development**

The notion of size is a limiting factor for countries with small populations because, statistically, they are less likely to produce top-level athletes. Some rich European NOCs (e.g. Monaco, Luxembourg) have a fairly low performance level, for example. Meanwhile, a large population can be an advantage, provided there is sufficient political will to exploit it: the People’s Republic of China, for example, is becoming one of the top nations, while India, on the other hand, has a poor record.

This political will is demonstrated through high levels of investment in sport, such as those made by Cuba, the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries in days gone by. In former Communist countries such as East Germany, a political will to discover talent, combined with high training standards, proved more important than their actual size (16 million inhabitants). It should also be remembered that East Germany had reached a level of general technical development which enabled it to bring the very best out of its athletes.





*Susanthika Jayasinghe from Sri Lanka, bronze medallist in the 200m in Sydney.*

Standards in women's athletics therefore highlight the emergence of two different worlds and a clear North-South divide where performance is concerned. Having looked at overall performance records, it is interesting to see how records for individual

events are distributed in terms of geography and standard.

#### **Variations in the spread of events, with a stable elite**

The four events chosen for this study represent typical geographical crite-

ria, particularly in terms of spread. They were also selected on the basis of how recently they were introduced:

- two traditional events: 100m and discus.
- two new events: triple jump and pole vault.

#### **100m: the benchmark event**

All NOCs with women's records include the 100m, which can be watched and run without much equipment or investment. It can therefore be considered a truly global event.

Performance indicators show the emergence of an elite based particularly in the Northern Hemisphere, but also in some African (Nigeria) and Caribbean (Bahamas, Jamaica) countries. This category of countries with more than 1,200 points clearly contains the best in the world.

The next categories down also show a good standard, with rich NOCs (southern and northern Europe) and less developed countries with large populations (India, South America) maintaining a very respectable level of performance. Some countries have one-off records, but at least they make an effort to compete (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Oceanian islands, etc). Nevertheless, the overall level remains fairly consistent from one country to the next, and national differences are at their smallest in this event.

#### **Discus: a wide range of records**

The women's discus is also practised more or less throughout the world. Many countries keep their own records. However, the level of performance is much more varied. The best throws are confined to a handful of NOCs. Eastern European countries, the People's Republic of China, Cuba and Australia make up the elite.



It should be pointed out that these top records were set around ten years ago. Anti-doping tests have helped to bring about a decline in the performances of female discus throwers. The table of valuations does not yet fully reflect this phenomenon. We can therefore consider the records in the second category to be very respectable.

Most African and Asian countries, together with the Oceanian islands, have very poor records. This may be for a variety of reasons: top-level discus throwing requires highly effective infrastructures and technical supervision, which can be relatively expensive. This factor is holding back many NOCs. Moreover, the image of female throwers is often very different from that of the models of femininity venerated by our societies. Girls probably find it more difficult to fulfil this role than that of a sprinter. This sociological aspect must be borne in mind, since it constitutes a second layer of selection. The emergence of countries of the former Soviet Union, Cuba and the People's Republic of China reflects a political will to win medals. Since these nations have concentrated on less popular women's events, where competition is not so fierce, the spread of results is unique.

**New events: one success and one failure**

The women's triple jump is more widespread than the pole vault. Money seems to be the main reason for this, since the pole vault is very expensive (equipment and technical supervision).

Performance indicators show that certain countries monopolize the record tables. A world hierarchy has developed. Even if they invest in an event, most countries which have no



*Olympic champion in the triple jump in Atlanta, Inessa Kravets from the Ukraine.*

record or whose record is poor have very little chance of catching up with the existing elite in women's athletics. Making do with a one-off record is not particularly productive. The spread of the women's pole vault therefore seems to depend on economic, political and temporal factors.

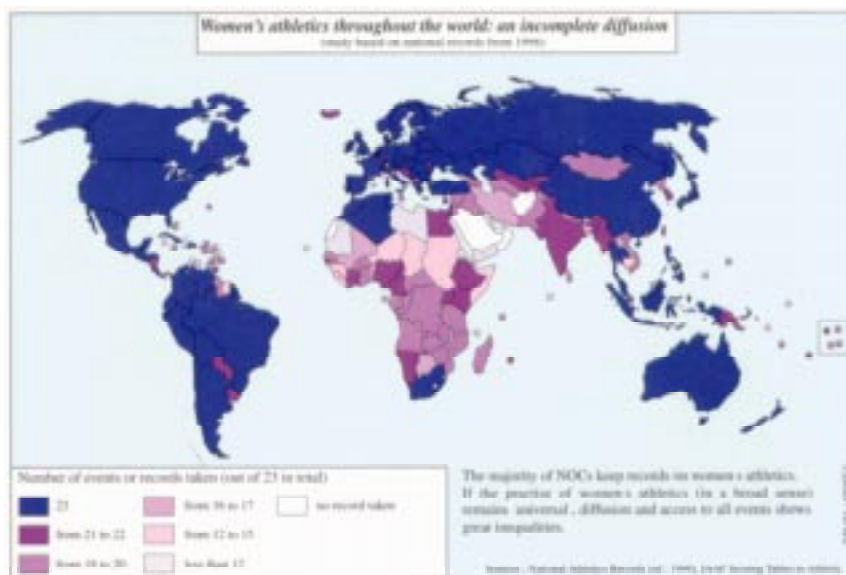
There remain gaps in the spread of the women's pole vault: it has not yet reached Africa, the Middle and Near East or the Indian sub-continent, for example. However, South American NOCs have a wide variety of records, possibly on account of their cultural links with Europe.

Performance indicators for the triple jump show the existence of a very small elite, although it is already very widespread for a new event.

These two new women's events demonstrate quite different patterns of participation. The triple jump is spreading because it requires very little investment, using just a long jump pit. An African NOC with a relatively high level of technical expertise could possibly win an Olympic title, for example. However, the potential for a less developed country to win the women's pole vault seems a long way off.

**Consistency in excellence?**

To conclude our study, we measured the degree of consistency in countries' performances by taking their best and worst records.





*Ghada Shouaa, Olympic scholarship-holder and Olympic champion in the heptathlon in Atlanta.*

The countries of the Northern Hemisphere, the People's Republic of China and Australia are consistently excellent: none of them have a single record beneath international standards. A number of less developed or small countries also display a high level of consistency, but with less impressive results which never better the national records of the top countries. Other countries are very inconsistent, with a low overall level of performance and one or two records of international standard. These countries can be divided into two groups:

- NOCs with one exceptional athlete (e.g. Ghada Shouaa in the Syrian Arab Republic);
- NOCs which have managed to develop one or a number of events where competition is fierce, such as sprinting and jumping in Nigeria and long distance running in Ethiopia.

#### **Conclusion**

Women's athletics is now almost global. However, not all events that make up the sport are practised in every country. Their geographical spread is incomplete and levels of performance differ greatly.

Although the governing bodies have opened previously male-dominated events to women, their efforts have not yet proved fully successful. The introduction of these new events (hammer and pole vault in particular) has failed to reach many NOCs and, where they are practised, the level of performance is often mediocre. This is probably due to a lack of resources (infrastructure and technical expertise) and restrictive socio-cultural factors. In fact, the best results in these events are achieved by the top NOCs, who demonstrate their superiority in international competitions. The globalization of success at the Olympic Games is unlikely to produce a significant short-term increase in the number of medal-winning countries (although individual athletes are still capable of remarkable sporting feats). It will do no more than increase levels of participation.

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This text is part of a series of four studies analyzing women's participation in major sports events and, in particular, in the Olympic Games. The studies were carried out by CERSO on the occasion of the Second World Conference on Women and Sport held in March 2000 in Paris (in the framework of a convention signed in 1999 between the French National Olympic Committee, the University of Franche-Comté and the IOC). The general aim of the convention is to promote research at universities on Olympic sports and the Olympic Movement in general. With the support of the IOC Olympic Studies Centre, it also encompasses work by academics, and the publishing of the conclusions of colloquiums and seminars.